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AUTHOR Bratton, Edward W.
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ABSTRACT

This discussion suggests that most English departments have dealt with the conflict between traditional instruction and the "back-to-the-basics" movement in the language arts by focusing on the individual needs of the student, on the subject in some of its most elementary aspects, and on teaching. The English curriculum, as well as teachers in the field, can benefit from the acceptance of seemingly contrary positions: the context of relaxed requirements and public demands for literacy, predictions for more leisure time and the translation of educational relevance into vocationalism, and so on. "Options for the Teaching of English: The Undergraduate Curriculum" (Modern Language Association) and "Statement on the Preparation of Teachers of English" (National Council of Teachers of English) are discussed in view of their ability to reconcile such conflicts, and the undergraduate curriculum at the University of Tennessee is described in order to illustrate the general pattern adopted by colleges to resolve the problem. (KS)

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Edward W. Bratton

Back to the Basics: an English Curriculum of "fearful symmetry"

I've never understood, really, why there is a little, darkly glassed door labeled "phone" on each of the elevators in McClung Tower, which houses the English offices on the University of Tennessee campus. But I like to think that, behind that mysterious little door on the elevator, is a direct line to God--just in case the damn thing begins a precipitous fall. Fortunately, I've had no occasion to check that notion out, so have not recently had God on the line, so to speak, when I might conveniently slip into our conversation a question or two about current problems with the English curriculum (itself in a sudden decline of various sorts lately, according to some). So I cannot speak from any borrowed perspective of omniscience, but merely from a very limited view, of which I am acutely aware.

I am participating in this ADE session of the Conference on English Education partly because I was teased into it by both the substance and the rapid-fire interrogative form of the suggested topics. They struck me as a bit like the string of questions in William Blake's Song of Innocence "The Lamb" and Song of Experience "The Tyger":

> What should a college [or university] English department mean when it uses the word "basics"? Are the basics to such a department grammar and syntax? logic and rhetoric? acquaintance with . . . selected British and American literary masterpieces? literary history and criticism? training in how one imparts knowledge he has gained? all of these? some of these? or all of these at varying

stages between freshman composition and the doctoral dissertation?

My response is: yes--and a good deal more, to boot.

I trust that answer is not altogether innocent and woolly, though you are bound to think it even more fuzzy as I progress. The fact is, as a professional I incline toward the "fearful symmetry" of both the poetry and the perspective of "The Tyger," embodying, as that poem does, the equally rich, human, and insistent demands of such contraries as emotion and reason, freedom and authority, energy and order, innovation and restraint. In terms of an English curriculum, I hope I recognize some of the problems, both internal and external to the profession, which those competing demands pose. As in Blake's poem, a strenuous twisting of sinews is sometimes required to reconcile them, the more apparent the more we particularize the context of recent years which they only generally describe, a context which can be both accurately and playfully characterized as oxymoronic at various levels of English education. You know it intimately.

It has been a context of some predicted, some real decreasing enrollments, but increasing challenges for English from open admissions policies and growing numbers of foreign students; a context of relaxed English requirements, fewer jobs for fewer English majors, ut a much more public awareness of declining literacy; a context of laments for our dissipating consciousness of a common cultural heritage, but cries for an

expanded grasp of its rich multiplicity; a context of real ethical needs and predictions for ever more leisure time, but translations of relevancy into vocationalism; a context of an inflated economy, but deflated legislative and community enthusiasn for notions about the efficacy of a liberal education generally. And so on. "At last!" we could say, "our very own identity crisis." Then came dread Accountability, surely one of the Seven Deadly Sins of social engineering.

There have been and are, then, many difficulties to be resolved somewhere between the conception of the academic blacksmith's "eye" and the grasping of his "hand" to give form to an English curriculum, between the conjectural "could frame thy fearful symmetry" of Blake's first stanza and the active "dare frame thy fearful symmetry" of the last, at once a simple and a momentous change. And in the process of that change, surely the English profession is defining itself. Yet, looking back some hundred years to the joint professorships in English and oratory or philolgy or history or logic or metaphysics, joint professorships with their "suggestions of compromise and uncertainty,"[1] the historian of our young profession is not likely to view any current tensions of our identity crisis as unique, but as contemporary manifestations of a continuum of our professional being--and perhaps one well worth cherishing into the future. Historically, our profession might well say as one with Wordsworth, "Fair seed-time had my soul, and I grew up/Fostered alike by beauty and by fear."

Suppose I were to say:

> Students find their own life and thought [and language] depicted in . . . American authors [and do their "best work" there]. But how can one study modern poetry [and drama] without knowing something of Homer and . . . masterpieces of the Athenian state?

Or:

> We are . . . obliged . . . to [instruct] students conditioned in entrance English . . . .--work really secondary and preparatory, and . . no sense forming a proper subject of collegiate instruction. [Yet] style . . . is neither wanted no appreciated . . . .

Or:

> It is a pity that we cannot develop further . . . the more scientific aspects of . . . criticism and literary history. [Yet] . . . the deeper and real life [of our students] does not respond, and, if emotion there be, it is wholly artificial. The aim of . . . [the undergraduate curriculum] should be, the development of general culture rather than the preparation for later . . . research.

I am, of course, saying none of those things. But they seem to me a remarkably current stream of opposites focused on three "basics" that I think we need to get back to and are getting back to in order to resolve some problems and improve the English curriculum: the student; some basic aspects of English as a subject, though by no means the only ones; and, teaching. I have merely juxtaposed a few of many pertinent scattered statements of several English professors contained in the

little volume English in American Universities, published in 1895 and compiled from curricular descriptions appearing in issues of The Dial during 1894.[2] I have done so partly as a reminder that is and was are but two tenses of the same verb. Even such an abbreviated and simplistic historical reminder, however, might suggest a current value for our profession of a genuinely historical perspective. Perhaps it could help to reduce apprehension about and hostility to almost any substantial change in the English curriculum on the one hand and to subdue any tendency to frenetic alternations on the other. A viable, continuing reconciliation of opposites seems to be the need, not an absolute obliteration of either the Hatfields or the McCoys. In the last instance, we would probably obtain an English curriculum either with a rigidity of order so brittle that it would crumble or with so amorphous an extension that it would simply disappear in a gaseous void.

I also want to place beside the little book of 1895, another, more selectively limited volume with a very similar format and purpose, Options for the Teaching of English: The Undergraduate Curriculum, published by the MLA in 1975. As the editor indicates, the book displays remarkable "varieties of curriculum organization and emphasis";[3] both Hatfields and McCoys are represented, though by no means always from the same campus. In the background commentary of professors, the book also provides snatches of the now-familiar story of how such variety generally originated in the late sixities because of student and some faculty unrest about stagnant curricula and regorous requirements, among other things, and because "the idea of requirements was being challenged almost every-

where in higher education."[4] One particularly disturbing generalization which the MLA compilation suggests to me is that if English departments had maintained genuinely serious, systematic, and thorough reviews of their curricula and requirements, at least some of them might not have been forced into the choice of "whole hog or none" and the profession in general might have been spared some costly educational mistakes in both directions.

Another disturbing and related aspect of the book is that it so frequently reveals the motivation for changes in an English curriculum to be an overriding, almost frantic desire for a kind of instant popularity with students. The many reasons for that situation are both very human and understandable; still I would make the obvious suggestion that making changes from such a motive is not the best way for a discipline to maintain its integrity (if, historically speaking, we have any). Nor is it the best way to serve the student in English education at any level. Which brings me to the first of the "basics" I mentioned and some aspects of the curriculum related to it or him or her.

The most recent NCTE Statement on the Preparation of Teachers of English is excellent in its emphasis on the affective values of English and in its support of teachers who invite students to respond to literature in terms of "what it says . . . about their [individual] lives, about other human beings, and about human life in general."[5] I see in that no desertion whatsoever of English as an academic subject, but only an encouragement toward enlargement for any who may have been neglecting the essence of literature. As John Gerber wrote in College English many years

ago, "We have developed great facility in teaching those matters requiring detachment: we have been chary of those which demand the student's engagement."[6] And he predicted a movement toward a reconciliation of the two in our teaching of literature. I think there is a similar movement in our shaping of the curriculum at all levels of English education, in which process we need also, in patient reason, to consider indiidual student interests. In the college English department, that movement should also, of course, result in a curriculum that more adequately prepares our English education majors for their future in the profession.

I also like the way the NCTE statement broadens out from the confines of the individual student's interests to more capaciously universal ones, a broadening generally in keeping with one professor's remark about the curriculum in the MLA book just mentioned: "too great a concentration on what is current [in interest or content] is no less narrow than an exclusive concern with some limited period of the past."[7] Again, a reconciliation is required. We should no more build up the curriculum exclusively from students interests that we should build it down exclusively from scholarly ones. Either course would result in silliness. A colleague and fine Victorian scholar is currently at work on a study of the Andy Griffith television series, but I would not expect him to propose a course in Mayberry, USA--unless he were willing to test its pertinence and quality against those of other courses in the English curriculum. And, fortunately, if there is one thing our profession has elaborately developed it is a network for just that kind of testing through our professional journals, conventions, and so on. Minority and ethnic and women's studies,

films, and psychology and literature, popular culture and the like either have passed through or are now in various stages of that process. If and when valuable current studies or approaches are validated, adequate provision should be made for them in the curriculum, where, for the most part, they will help to expand traditional toward current student interests. Certainly as a people--a diverse, yet human community--no less than as a profession, we owe more debts than I can enumerate here to the literary and cultural heritage we have at least called and taught as our own in the past. In the English curriculum, it can and will share, but it will not disappear. It, too, can stand the testing, and handily, and be the better for it in our mind's eye, as in our heart's. In any case, the traditional was once the current, and the two are not necessarily mutually exclusive, but frequently offer insights one to the other. We are told in an editorial note to an article on American Indian verse that the author's interest in the subject "stems from a study of mystical expression in British and American literature."[8] Certainly my own relishing of a poem like "Dream Variations" by Langston Hughes is quickened by familiarity with its technique in poems like Blake's "The Tyger." And, in general, the tradition we have made the core of our literature offerings has in much more important ways nurtured our collective sensibilities to both the aesthetic and the richly human in new works brought before us. In that sense, perhaps we might say that yesterday's conception of that tradition as a single shaft of light has passed through the prism of our souls and has become a glorious rainbow. Who would wish it away from the English curriculum? Not today's student certainly; nor the professor either, I trust.

The MLA book of 1975 also provides some of the earliest collective evidence of a general movement back to another of those "basics" for shaping an English curriculum toward a symmetry of both vitality and order--and here I shall not be quite so woolly with the word "basics." I refer to the return to writing and the various skills pertaining to it in courses, writing labs, diagnostic tests at various levels of the curriculum, and especially a return to emphasis on freshman composition at colleges and universities across the country. It is a return more recently confirmed by an array of reports in both the academic and the public press. Whatever the persuasion of others about a general decline in literacy, I have had the curious feeling of being both ahead of and behind the headlines. Nor will I debate whether freshman composition even belongs in the curriculum of the English department. For most, it is there. Historically, it has helped in several ways to keep us alive as academic departments and has given us the budgetary means to do much else that we also, and rightly, consider "basics" in the upper-division and graduate curricula and, for example, in the expansion of understanding of language and enjoyment of literature through criticism and research.

What has recently happened with writing and the English curriculum at the University of Tennessee perhaps follows the general pattern. Essentially squeezed down into two nominally 4-hour quarters by a close college-wide vote five years ago, freshman composition was last month encouraged back twoard a 3-hour, three-quarter sequence by a vote ratio of six to one. In brief, the original, standard three-quarter sequence consisted mainly of a quarter of writing and study of types of essays, followed by two quarters of analytical writing based on the study of

literary genres. But sensible changes, now under discussion, will probably characterize the department's new three-quarter proposal, which may serve here as at least a particular, though modest, instance of reconciling different interests and requirements in the curriculum at one level of English education. Again briefly, the proposal calls for first-quarter emphasis on the principles of rhetoric through intensive reading of essays and writing based on the student's personal experience. A smaller writing workshop, carrying one hour's credit and meeting two hours per week with a different teacher, will be required concurrently of students needing additional individual and group assistance in grammer, reading comprehension, and the like. The focus of writing during the second quarter will be great themes in literature, and the third quarter calls for the application of writing skills to areas of special interest, depending on the student's choice of several courses such as business and technical writing or types of literature or form and meaning in language, in which, for example, students would study and apply techniques of elementary linguistics, semantics, logic, and so on. By offering courses more nearly in keeping with individual student needs and interests, the department hopes more successfully to help students improve their writing skills, thereby also reducing the current number of course repeaters and helping to satisfy, another necessary contrary, budgetary considerations. Entering freshman already proficient in writing also have special needs and will have the usual option of an Honors sequence and at various stages, some will have the opportunity to move directly into appropriate ones of the department's simultaneously developing creative, technical, and special writing courses above the freshman level, which will be staffed largely by professional writers in the various fields. And many of these last

courses should prove to be excellent ones for both liberal arts and education English majors. In short, the writing program as a whole, though far from being unique, or even drastic in proposed changes, should nonetheless be an innovative move in the right direction for Tennessee and one which seriously attempts a reconciliation of various needs and interests, not only those of this group or that group of students and of the academic and general communities, but also those legitimate demands of a most basic subject for thorough curricular consideration, decent curricular accommodations, and for instruction in earnest. Which brings me to the third of my "basics": teaching.

Teaching. I wish I had more time. At some point or several in one or more of their various roles as students, teachers, scholars, administrators, members of annual tenure and promotion boards, most English professors have probably experienced the excruciating feeling that teaching, as Hazlitt might say, "always seems to come in like the tail of an et cetera." So perhaps it is fitting--I hope, ironically--to take up that most basic of "basics" at this point, with at least a rapid assertion or two. First, all English faculty members, especially at the typical, public graduate institution (I use precise figures from my own as the example) need to remain constantly aware that about 97% or more of the students enrolled in their department's classes are undergraduates, very few of whom (often less than 1%) are liberal-arts English majors and perhaps two or three percent of whom are English education majors. Both such important information as that and the implications of such observations as those of William deBary in The Philosophy of the

Curriculum cry out for--and are increasingly receiving, I think--special emphasis in the processes of curricular planning and other English faculty deliberations. "At issue," deBary writes of general education:

> is the question of whether in . . . [the past] the academy has not enjoyed such prestige . . . attention, . . . and . . . privilege (I refer to the competition for "star" scholars and the improper concessions made to free them from [undergraduate] teaching) that its members had come to take their own existence, rights, and freedoms for granted. Today nothing less than an active commitment to education--and not just the training of scholars--can reestablish these on a sound basis.[9]

And today, there appears to be in some ways a continuing, but also a new trend of growing and very genuine concern about effective English teaching and training for it among English professors at graduate institutions. The MLA book on English programs provides clear evidence of that, just as it indicates that more undergraduate courses, including those in the basic skills, are now being taught by the same senior staff which usually controls the curricular fate of those courses. "And when the stars [the angels] threw down their spears,/ [not all] . . . watered heaven with their tears." Actually, there hadn't been quite as much battle to do up there lately anyway. Besides, they have only fallen and checked their wings part-time, in exchange for equally proper professional robes and only more earthly arms. And, once in awhile, the troops down below need to see a little purple in the field. Again as an example, the reorientation that will necessarily accompany the proposed freshman

composition series at Tennessee also follows and reflects the new and general trend just mentioned, in other ways. The changes will mean a reorientation and intensification of the long-established and closely-supervised teaching apprenticeship program and of the required teaching tutorials for graduate assistants, as well as the introduction or expansion of graduate courses academically correlative to the changes. The result should certainly be graduates much better trained and experienced in the kind of English teaching most of them will do in institutions at various levels of English education. And, in general, the clearly increasing communication with colleagues in colleges of education and with language arts supervisors and teachers in the public-schools--highly developed at some institutions and growing at my own through the department head's initiative--can only further improve the English curriculum toward the spectrum of realistic needs for English teaching today at all levels. I applaud that move back to yet another basic, the common sense of consultation.

Trying to reconcile sometimes contrary interests, needs, demands is almost always risky, partly because it almost always involves change in the order of the moment, whatever the particular nature of that order may be--whether of "distant deeps or skies." Especially human beings will have grown comfortable with that order, and it becomes beauty in their eyes. Change is fearful, but at the instant of its crowning, becomes order. Fearful symmetry: a constant metamorphosis, has been historically, I think, the recurring challenge and opportunity for our profession and its most public conception of itself, the curriculum. I have tried to suggest that we have gone back to the "basics," to considerations of the student,

the subject in some of its most elementary aspects, and teaching, in order to meet that challenge by locating in them the reconciling means both to conceive and to shape that fearful symmetry. "Without contraries," Blake tells us, "there is no progression." I think he is right. And if he is, should we not daily welcome, within and without the academy, our context of contraries? Does that context not force English as a profession ever to chance the tyger--which we must surely do, or wither away and die.

Edward W. Bratton
University of Tennessee

FOOTNOTES

[1] William Riley Parker, "Where Do English Departments Come From?" College English, 28 (1967), 345.

[2] William Morton Payne, ed. (Boston: Heath, 1895), pp. 81, 53; 93, 179; 85, 179, 83 respectively.

[3] Elizabeth Wooten Cowan, p. iv.

[4] Joseph Williams, in Options, ed. Cowan, p. 18.

[5] (Urbana: NCTE, 1976), p. 1.

[6] "Literature--Our Untamable Discipline," College English, 28 (1967), 358.

[7] Paula Johnson, in Options, ed. Cowan, p. 116.

[8] See College English, 35 (1974), 693.

[9] Wm. Theodore de Bary, "General Education and the University Crisis," in The Philosophy of the Curriculum: The Need for General Education, ed. Sidney Hook, Paul Kurtz, and Miro Todorovich (Buffalo: Prometheus, 1975), p. 4.